

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BUCAR 01748 111028Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
AID-05 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /077 W
-----111056Z 122632 /11

P R 110938Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY BUCHAREST
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2091
INFO AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
AMEMBASSY BERLIN
AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PRAGUE
AMEMBASSY SOFIA
AMEMBASSY WARSAW
USMISSION BERLIN
USMISSION NATO
AMCONSUL MUNICH
USMISSION USUN
USMISSION GENEVA

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, RO
SUBJ: POLITICAL ASPECTS OF EARTHQUAKE DISASTER

1. SUMMARY. SINCE HIS SOMEWHAT PREMATURE RETURN FROM AFRICA, PRESIDENT CEAUSESCU, WITH TYPICAL BLEND OF CRITICISM AND EXHORTATION, HAS PROPELLED HIMSELF TO FOREFRONT OF RESCUE AND RELIEF EFFORTS. VIA HIGHLY-PUBLICIZED VISITS TO SEVERELY DAMAGED AREAS OF COUNTRY, HE HAS LEFT LITTLE DOUBT AS TO WHO IS IN CHARGE. PUBLIC REACTION TO THIS POSTURING HAS BEEN MIXED AND WE DETECT DISSATISFACTION IN BUCHAREST ALREADY. ALSO, IF HE RUNS TRUE TO FORM, CEAUSESCU'S LONGER-TERM RE-
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PAGE 02 BUCAR 01748 111028Z

ACTION TO DISASTER WILL BE TO INCREASE PRESSURE ON POPULACE TO FURTHER TIGHTEN THEIR BELTS IN ORDER RECOUP PRESENT LOSSES. REACTION IS LIABLE TO BE LESS THAN ENTHUSIASTIC. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE HIS RETURN TO BUCHAREST 0815 MARCH 5, MORNING AFTER EARTHQUAKE, PRESIDENT CEAUSEWCU HAS

ASSUMED TOTAL AND HIGHLY VISIBLE CONTROL OF RELIEF AND RESCUE OPERATIONS. PRESS AND MEDIA COVERAGE OF HIS ACTIVITIES PROJECT IMAGE OF A DYNAMIC LEADER, "BESIDE HIS PEOPLE, IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD", TO QUOTE ONE SCINTEIA ARTICLE. IMMEDIATELY UPON ARRIVAL CEAUSESCU TOURED MOST DEVASTATED AREAS OF CAPITAL, CONVOKED POLEXCO MEETING, AND HELD TELEPHONIC CONFERENCE CALL WITH ALL 39 COUNTY FIRST SECRETARIES TO ASSESS DAMAGE.

3. PRESS HAS PROVIDED EXPANDED COVERAGE OF HIS TRAVELS IN AND AROUND CAPITAL, AS WELL AS OF HIS HELICOPTER FLIGHTS TO AREAS MOST SERIOUSLY AFFECTED OUTSIDE OF BUCHAREST. TV COVERAGE OF THESE VISITS FEATURES AN ACTIVE, GESTURING CEAUSESCU, TALKING WITH THE PEOPLE AND GIVING ORDERS TO SUBORDINATES AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS. SEVERAL JOURNALISTS WHO SAW TYPICAL CEAUSESCU PERFORMANCE IN PLOIESTI MARCH 7 JUDGED CROWD REACTION TO BE APPRECIATIVE, IF NOT OVERLY ENTHUSIASTIC.

4. WHILE PRAISING COLLECTIVE EFFORTS, CEAUSESCU HAS, AS USUAL, ALSO BEEN CRITICAL. MARCH 6 POLEXCO COMMUNIQUE NOTED PRESIDENT'S CRITICISM OF "SOME ASPECTS" OF RESCUE OPERATIONS, AS WELL AS HIS "NEGATIVE APPRECIATIONS" FOR SOME BUCHAREST ORGANIZATIONAL FAILURES. HE DENIGRATED THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS NEW COMPUTER CENTER WHICH WAS DESTROYED AND HAS ORDERED AN INVESTIGATION INTO COLLAPSE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 BUCAR 01748 111028Z

OF ANOTHER BUILDING TO FIND OUT WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR NON-OBSERVANCE OF BUILDING STANDARDS. MARCH 9 POLEXCO COMMUNIQUE HAS ALSO ORDERED STUDY OF WHY CERTAIN BUILDINGS COLLAPSED. (COMMENT: SOME ROMANIANS MIGHT FIND THIS REMARK SLIGHTLY IRONICAL IN VIEW OF RECENT CAMPAIGN TO CUT DOWN ON USE OF BUILDING MATERIALS IN NEW CONSTRUCTION.) IN ADDITION, PRESS COVERAGE COULD NOT RESIST DIG AT PAST NOTING THAT MOST OF BUILDINGS WHICH COLLAPSED DATED FROM INTERWAR PERIOD AND WERE BUILT BY OWNERS LESS CONCERNED ABOUT SAFETY THAN MAKING A PROFIT. CEAUSESCU ALSO POINTEDLY OBSERVED THAT HIGH-RISE APARTMENTS BUILT UNDER SOCIALISM HAD WITHSTOOD SHOCK. NONETHELESS, MARCH 9 POLEXCO DECISION TALKS ABOUT NEED TO ASSURE THAT ALL FUTURE CONSTRUCTION BE OF MOST SECURE NATURE. (COMMENT: MORE THAN ONE ROMANIAN HAS EXPRESSED AMAZEMENT, TINGED BY RELIEF, THAT MOST NEW BUILDINGS DID HOLD. MANY HAD NOT EXPECTED THIS.)

5. COMMENT: IT IS DIFFICULT TO JUDGE PUBLIC REACTION TO CEAUSESCU'S PERFORMANCE. BY SO CLEARLY TAKING COMMAND, HE BECOMES VULNERABLE TO A CERTAIN EXTENT IF THINGS DO NOT GO WELL AS PERHAPS IS INEVITABLE. MARCH 10 POLEXCO MADE RELIEF OPERATIONS EVEN MORE OF A FAMILY AFFAIR BY CREATION OF "NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF ASSISTANCE", HEADED BY ELENA CEAUSESCU, COMMITTEE WILL COORDINATE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DONATIONS AND ENSURE THEIR JUDICIOUS USE.

6. WE ARE ALREADY AWARE OF SOME DISSATISFACTION HERE IN BUCHAREST. FROM START RADIO BUCHAREST HAS BROADCAST MORE MUSIC THAN INFORMATION AND CONSEQUENTLY RFE PROBABLY HAS NEVER HAD A WIDER LISTENING AUDIENCE THAN AT PRESENT. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN CRITICISM OF INITIAL SLOW REACTION TO THE DISASTER (COLLAPSED BUILDINGS NOT CORDONED OFF, ON-LOOKERS OR VEHICLE TRAFFIC NOT CONTROLLED, RESCUE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 BUCAR 01748 111028Z

OPERATIONS DELAYED, ETC.) WHICH MOST PEOPLE ATTRIBUTE TO CEAUSESCU'S ABSENCE FROM THE COUNTRY AND CONSEQUENT RELUCTANCE OF SUBORDINATES TO TAKE ACTION. MARCH 9 POLEXCO POINTEDLY PRAISED CURRENT BUCHAREST OPERATIONS, IN SPITE OF SOME DEFICIENCIES AT BEGINNING. THE SLOW RELEASE OF CASUALTY INFORMATION HAS ALSO CAUSED ANGER. IN ADDITION, DELAYED OR CONTRADICTORY DECISIONS AS TO STRUCTURAL VIABILITY OF DAMAGED BUILDINGS HAVE RESULTED IN CONFUSION WITH PEOPLE FIRST BEING TOLD TO EVACUATE AND LATER TO RETURN. FINALLY THERE HAS BEEN SOME DISPARAGING COMMENT ABOUT CEAUSESCU'S "PLAYING POLITICS" WITH DISASTER.

7. NEVERTHELESS DEPTH OF THIS FEELING IS DIFFICULT TO GAUGE. ALSO WE ARE UNCERTAIN WHETHER IT EXTENDS MUCH OUTSIDE OF BUCHAREST OR TO THOSE RELATIVELY UN-AFFECTED BY DIASTER. MARCH 8 POLEXCO TOOK UNPRECEDENTED DECISION TO PROVIDE FREE HOUSING, FURNITURE (INCLUDING RADIO AND TV), AND VACATIONS TO THOSE MOST SERIOUSLY AFFECTED (BUCHAREST 1679). THIS MAY HELP TO STEM DISSATISFACTION, IF MEASURES CAN BE EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED. HOWEVER, IF HE RUNS TRUE TO FORM, CEAUSESCU WILL SOON ASK FOR STILL FURTHER SACRIFICE FROM CITIZENRY TO RECOUP SERIOUS ECONOMIC DAMAGE SUFFERED BY COUNTRY. IN THIS REGARD MARCH 9 POLEXCO HAS DECIDED POSTPONE IMPLEMENTATION BY A YEAR OF PREVIOUSLY ANNOUNCED REDUCTION OF WORK WEEK. IN ADDITION THOSE WHO SUFFERED LESS THAN TOTAL DAMAGE ARE EXPECTED TO HANDLE REPAIRS ON THEIR OWN. WE EXPECT THESE WILL BE ONLY FIRST OF MANY SUCH DECISIONS WHICH POPULATION WILL BE LESS THAN ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT ACCEPTING ONCE INITIAL PERIOD OF DISASTER HAS PASSED.

BARNES

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL SITUATION, NATURAL DISASTERS, EARTHQUAKES
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Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977BUCHAR01748
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
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From: BUCHAREST
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Litigation History:
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Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
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Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3142862
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: POLITICAL ASPECTS OF EARTHQUAKE DISASTER
TAGS: PINT, RO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/2cde3dba-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009